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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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We're only a few weeks into January, and I'm really sick of the cold and snow!! If we're lucky, this week will actually pass without any snow. The cold, on the other hand, has been here to stay for awhile!

Okay, so we now have a new president. All that you hear everywhere is how things will really change, it's historic, etc., etc. While all this may be true, aren't people being just a little pre-judgmental? Really now, the man hasn't been in office a week yet and already people are praising this new president. Let's be realistic, and give him a term of office before we determine his track record. Realize, like most (if not all) new presidents, are glorified before they even get the chair in the Oval Office warm!

On to another pet peeve: spam. Just what is its purpose? Do people send this garbage just to irritate those of us (all of us?!) who end up receiving it? Do spammers really think that most people actually open, much less read, this stuff? I mean really, how "real" is an e-mail whose subject line contains more misspellings than on a first-graders first spelling test? Sure, it's to avoid spam filters, but who really cares? And how about those e-mails with subjects in foreign languages? Do you really think that I'll open something like that? And I certainly don't have a need to change various body parts, buy pirated software, trust messages from banks in which I do not have an account, or any other topics of non-interest. With all of the spam that I get on a daily basis (and it has decreased somewhat lately), I can't believe that more spammers aren't caught and incarcerated. What a waste of time and bandwidth, for everyone. Spammers, get a life!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, there just ain't enough stuff in on

the UseNet this week for a column, so I'm going to just get a few things off my chest and then go. Okay?

First of all... these CEOs and supposed 'leaders of industry'... they're sticking it to us again. THEY may not think much of spending a million dollars point two on redecorating their offices, but I can't think of anyone that _I_ have ever met that could conceive of it. I'm not saying that these guys and gals should live lives of stoic virtue or ascetic deprivation, but the excesses that they're displaying are really good examples of being out of touch and of either not understanding or not caring about either the company they serve or its customers or clients.

I mean, c'mon. Can you imagine the audacity it takes to go to Washington DC in your private corporate jet to ask Congress for federal money because your company is broke?

And how about these financial institutions? Billions of dollars in bail-out money, and they've basically said, "Naaaaah, we're not going to tell you how we're spending it."

These are the self-same people that would make me jump through hoops about what I wanted to borrow it for, how and when I planned on spending it and such just to borrow my OWN money (equity in my home) and would charge me a healthy interest rate on top of it! What's wrong with this picture?

Of course, we cannot allow these institutions or industries to simply be lost... it would be devastating... and I really don't want to see either the banking auto industries socialized either. That's a sure way to kill innovation and competition.

But since the 70's, when The Big Three got together with President Nixon and presented a united front against toughening safety regulations... and in fact asked for and had safety regulations because they had, as Chrysler exec Lee Iacocca put it, "the goddamned japs breathing down our necks"... there really hasn't BEEN competition. Oh sure, each one copied the ideas of the others and tried to out-do one another, but they knew that through brand loyalty and the limited number of options (is 3 or 4 manufacturers REALLY enough to ensure a free market?

And now their problem is the same as with the finance industry: They're no longer in their original business. GM's major product isn't the minivan or SUV anymore. It's stock. Their main concern is that their stock offerings look good on Wall Street so that people will buy their stocks and... well, make the stock offerings look good on Wall Street so that people will want to buy their stocks. Vehicles are just an intermediate step these days.

That brings us to politics. For the last two years, we've been hearing the democratic majority saying that we didn't see a lot of movement because they were dealing with the things that congress normally has to deal with. "The wheels turn slowly" and so forth.

Well, in President Obama's first three full days of 'work', he's... let's see.. signed an order to close 'Gitmo', okay funding for stem cell research, reinstate funding for organizations that support abortion rights, and push for his own stimulus package to get us back on the path toward recovery.

For what it's worth, I think we should be giving money to NONE of these

institutions, companies or industries. Hell, with the almost three TRILLION dollars we're talking about (which is what I figure this is all going to end up costing), you could give about $6,600.00 to every man, woman and child in the United States. Letting them spend the money as they saw fit might go a long way toward helping the economy, and make the companies and industries actually WORK for the money.

Of course, the problem with this is that people would pay off their debts and build up their savings to make themselves more secure with the money, and that isn't the way to boost the economy. The problem here is that that's the way responsible people are SUPPOSED to act. You're SUPPOSED to get rid of your debt and secure your future a little bit.

But back to the politics... At this point in the previous administration, I don't think they'd done anything more than complain about some computer keyboards that never existed and finished planning 41's first presidential vacation.

The rhetoric coming from the republicans about closing Guantanamo Bay is predictable. First of all, they steadfastly maintain that these are dangerous terrorists (despite the fact that the only study on the subject that the Armed Forces has ever done determined that a maximum of eight percent of the people held in secret around the world had anything at all to do with terror groups) and that 'we' know that they are a danger. In the very next breath they complain that they shouldn't be required to charge or prosecute these people because they don't have enough evidence. Okay, Boner, which is it? Do we have proof that they're terrorists or don't we?

Then they mention the fact that no one in this country would want these dangerous criminals in prisons near where they live. Okay, ask folks in Corcoran, Chino or Ossining about that. I'm sure that they'd rather not have the dangerous felons contained in Corcoran Prison, California Institution for Men, or Sing Sing so close either. But the whole argument is a red herring. And it is, quite frankly, beneath us.

Then there's the hubbub about Obama being our first African-American president. Yes, that's true, and it's an accomplishment and a milestone. But is this the time to waste time and energy on that? There'll be plenty of time for that once the economy is back on track, along with our standing around the world and we've REALLY done something to counteract terrorism. I've even seen people go as far as to point out that Obama is 'only' half African-American. Is that even possible? What does it have to do with anything?

I wish people would talk about the REALLY unique thing about having elected Obama... He's our first Hawaiian president!

You don't think that's as noteworthy as being the first African-American president? Okay, then think about how many African-Americans there are (around 39.2 million) and how many Hawaiians there are (about 1.3 million). Now, which is more of a long shot, having an African-American president or having a Hawaiian president? [grin]

Well, that's about it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same channel, and be ready to listen to what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Ubisoft Buys Southlogic Studios!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Creature Keeper, 'Spore' for Kids!
Nintendo Wii Breaks 10-Million!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Nintendo Wii Breaks 10-Million-Unit Barrier

The Nintendo Wii sold over 10 million units in the U.S. in 2008, the first game console ever to break that barrier, according to new NPD data relayed by the News Market.

The report said that the Nintendo Wii racked up 10.17 million sales in 2008, followed closely by the company's sister portable console, the Nintendo DS, with 9.95 million. Both consoles broke the previous record set in 2007, when the Nintendo DS sold 8.52 million units.

As a result, the Nintendo Wii represented 55 percent of all home console sales in 2008, while the DS nailed 72 percent of all portable system sales, according to the report.

EA Shows 'Creature Keeper,' 'Spore' for Kids

Electronic Arts said Wednesday that it plans this summer to release an all-new, stand-alone version of Spore for kids.

The new game, which will allow multiple children to play together in a very Spore-like universe, will be called Creature Keeper, said Lucy Bradshaw, the general manager of EA's Emeryville, Calif.-based Maxis studio, which created Spore.

In addition, at its "State of the Universe" event here, EA also unveiled plans for Galactic Adventures, the first expansion to Spore. It is planned for a spring release and will feature a set of new tools for the massive space stage of the hit evolution game that, in addition to the existing "play," "create," and "share" tools, will let players choose to create their own adventures in space.

And EA topped off its set of announcements by saying that it expects to release all-new versions of Spore for the Nintendo Wii and DS game consoles, titled Spore Hero and Spore Hero Arena, respectively.

The announcements were the first EA has made that showcase the video game giant’s future plans for Spore, a game that it has clearly invested huge resources in. The game, from legendary designer Will Wright, tasks players with navigating five distinct stages - cell, creature, tribe, civilization and space. Though it has sold fairly well, some have argued that it hasn’t lived up to its advance billing, particularly because it was years in the works. Also, the game was originally released with a version of digital rights management that limited the number of installs consumers could have. Many people resisted the DRM restrictions, and late last year, EA removed them.

However, either because of the DRM or in spite of it, Spore became one of the most pirated games of 2008.

Now, with Creature Keeper, EA and Maxis hope they can attract a much younger audience to the Spore universe. Unlike the original game, the kids version will allow multi-player play. It does not require Spore to play, but it will allow kids to import creatures from the original game. It will be released for PC and Mac, just as the original game was.

The idea, said Bradshaw, is to give kids an easier way to experience the fun and exploration of Spore, and to do so with other friends.

"They can invite friends over," Bradshaw said, "and have play dates with their creatures."

With the Galactic Adventures expansion (see video below), meanwhile, EA is attempting to address one of the biggest criticisms of the main space stage of Spore: That players could not directly interact with the worlds they encountered during their interstellar journeys. Instead, they would be restricted to flying above any planets they found along the way.

Now, however, they will be able to beam down to new planets. More important, however, may be that Maxis is making available to Spore players a set of planetary adventure creation tools they’ve previously only had in-house.

Among other things, the expansion offers players terra-forming tools, making it possible to build all-new planets from scratch, and populate them with all manner of buildings, creatures, rivers and other geographical features. Players can choose any creation from the 65 million item-strong, player-created Sporepedia, the official Spore social media system.

Bradshaw said that the tools that will be available in Galactic Adventures were not ones that were originally planned to be included in Spore. Nor was the expansion long in the works, she said. Instead, she explained, the team at Maxis saw the ways that people were playing Spore and listened to requests from players to have more interaction and control over the space stage.

While EA isn’t talking about total sales figures for Spore at this point, Bradshaw did say that to date, there have been more than 65 million creations uploaded to Sporepedia, and more than 6 million downloads of the Creature Creator, a tool that allows people to make their own Spore creatures without owning the full game.

Ubisoft Buys Brazilian Videogame Maker Southlogic Studios

French videogame-making powerhouse Ubisoft said Tuesday it has bought Southlogic Studios, adding Brazil’s oldest videogame developer to a growing list of acquisitions.

"As Brazil’s most experienced and premier development studio, Southlogic has proven its agility in adapting to new technologies and genres on a variety of platforms," said Ubisoft worldwide studios director Christine Burgess-Quemard.

"This acquisition reinforces our commitment to attracting talent in South America, and Brazil in particular, further boosting the group’s ambitious expansion plans."

Southlogic is the latest in a series of Ubisoft acquisitions.

In July of last year, Ubisoft announced the purchase of Canadian special effects studio Hybride Technologies in a move to wed Ubisoft’s hot videogames with Hollywood films.

Montreal-based Hybride has put its cinematic special effects prowess to work in films including "Sin City" and animated blockbuster "300."

Ubisoft intends to use Hybride technology to make more film-like videogames and as leverage for getting movies made from its titles, such as its franchise based on Tom Clancy military espionage fiction novels.

In November, Ubisoft announced the acquisition of Massive Entertainment, the Sweden-based studio behind popular strategy title "World In Conflict."

"Ubisoft is growing at an intense pace and our strategy is to ensure the strength of our global creative teams," Burgess-Quemard said at the time.

Ubisoft has seen its coffers swell with strong sales of its titles.

The firm has benefitted from tailoring titles for Nintendo’s Wii videogame consoles and the Japanese firm’s popular DS handheld devices.

Ubisoft’s winning streak is continuing with freshly-released hits including adventure game "Prince of Persia;" open-world action title "Far Cry 2," and "Tom Clancy’s End War" military strategy game.

Southlogic has worked with numerous studios worldwide and most recently collaborated with Ubisoft on a "Wedding Designer" Imagine line title for play on DS devices.

"We have been delighted with our collaboration with Ubisoft on their Imagine line of games," declared Southlogic founder Christian Lykawka.

"The entire Southlogic team is excited about the potential for growth and development as part of Ubisoft Sao Paulo and having our creations reach players throughout the world."

Southlogic will become part of Ubisoft’s operations in Sao Paulo.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Steve Jobs’s Cancer May Have Recurred

Pancreatic cancer experts say they are puzzled by what is ailing Apple Inc. Chief Executive Steve Jobs, because it is not clear how serious his health problems are or how directly they relate to his bout with cancer.

Last week, Jobs said he had an easily treatable "hormonal imbalance" that was robbing his body of the proteins it needs. Then, on Wednesday, the 53-year-old CEO said his problems were "more complex" than originally thought, and he would take a medical leave of absence for six months.

Doctors who have not treated Jobs say they can only speculate without hard information, but they said the tumor he was treated for in 2004 could have spread to another organ or resurfaced in the pancreas, requiring surgery or other treatment.

Jobs could also be coping with side effects of that surgery that can be treated easily, they said.

In 2004, Jobs was treated for a rare type of pancreatic cancer called an islet-cell, or neuroendocrine, tumor. Such tumors can be benign or malignant, but they usually grow slowly and are far less deadly than most pancreatic tumors.

The American Cancer Society estimates that 37,680 Americans get pancreatic cancer each year, but few get islet-cell tumors of the kind Jobs had. The tumors are easily removed surgically but recur in roughly half of patients, said Dr. Roderich Schwarz, a cancer surgeon at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Dr. Clay Semenkovich, an endocrinologist at Washington University in St. Louis, said in a telephone interview, "(Jobs) may have a new mass that’s substantially altering his physiology and causing him to lose weight."

The pancreas - a spongy organ the size of a large banana - produces enzymes used in digestion.

Islet-cell tumors can cause over-secretion of hormones including insulin into the bloodstream, wreaking havoc on digestion and leading to drastic weight loss.

Semenkovich said that could explain Jobs’ "hormonal imbalance," but added that the limited information made it hard to say for sure.

Apple’s cryptic missives on Jobs’ health have not deterred speculation - sparked by his gaunt appearance at an Apple event in June 2008 - that his cancer has returned.

But his drastic weight loss could have other, less ominous explanations,

doctors said.

Jobs' surgery in 2004 is likely to have been the so-called Whipple procedure -- an extensive and complicated operation that involves several organs besides the pancreas, doctors agree.

Weight loss is a common side effect, since a partial pancreas may not be able to effectively aid in the digestion of proteins, carbohydrates and fats.

"If an operation removes 30 to 50 percent of the pancreas, you're missing cell mass that produces juices that aid digestion. It could lead to weight loss and fatigue," Schwarz said in an interview at an American Society of Clinical Oncology conference on gastrointestinal cancers in San Francisco.

Jobs may also have insulin deficiency, which would result in diabetes, doctors said. They added that treatments for these side effects are indeed "simple and straightforward," as Jobs has said.

Schwarz said patients who lack digestive enzymes can take enzyme capsules to aid digestion, and they are effective fairly quickly.

That would not explain why Jobs would need six months of medical leave.

Joseph Kim, a cancer specialist and surgeon at the City of Hope medical center near Los Angeles, said patients whose cancers recur in nearby organs, usually the liver, can be treated using less-invasive procedures than surgery. Cancers can be cut out or burned, and the recovery takes only a few days, he said.

In Jobs' case, "we're probably talking about something more complicated, like surgery," that would take longer, Kim said. Surgery on patients with recurrent islet-cell tumors can be "extremely difficult, if not risky," he added.

Semenkovich said Jobs may need new surgery, and that six months is a reasonable time for preparation, surgery and recovery, given his weight loss. "Surgery in somebody who has lost a lot of weight is a risk," and recovery could take longer, he said.

Microsoft Will Cut 5,000 Jobs as Net Income Declines

Microsoft reported an 11 percent drop in net income for its fiscal second quarter compared to the year-earlier period. Revenue was up two percent to $16.63 billion, but profit was $4.17 billion, or 47 cents a share, versus $4.71 billion and 50 cents a year earlier.

Analysts had expected earnings per share of 49 cents. Microsoft's stock dropped to around $17 a share in late trading.

The software giant said economic conditions and a weak PC market in the year-ending quarter negatively impacted its Windows division, where revenue fell eight percent. A continuing shift to lower-priced netbooks also hurt the company's profit margins.

But CFO Chris Liddell assured investors that Microsoft would respond to

"volatility in the macroeconomic environment" by implementing a $1.5 billion reduction in operating expenses.

"The economy clearly has deteriorated more than we expected," Liddell said during a conference call. "We have initiated a number of cost-saving steps which we shall layer in over the course of the next year."

Among other things, Microsoft will freeze pay raises and cut up to 5,000 jobs in research and development, marketing, sales, finance, legal, human resources, and IT over the next 18 months, including 1,400 jobs now. "We are also looking for reductions in marketing expenses and discretionary spending," Liddell said.

The 5,000 job cuts are all internal positions, Liddell noted. "Outside contractors are not included in that number, and we also will certainly be looking at reducing that," he said.

Still, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer said that even as the company eliminates some jobs, it will be adding more workers in key areas to take advantage of whatever market opportunities lie ahead.

"We don’t plan on shrinking, but we are putting the brakes on," Ballmer told investors. "We are going to continue to invest in important areas of opportunity for the company," such as search. "But at the same time we are prioritizing," he said.

Ballmer admitted that the current economic climate is challenging. "We certainly are in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime set of economic conditions, and neither the consumer side nor the business side of the tech industry is immune," he said.

Microsoft also said earnings and revenue are likely to be lower for the rest of its fiscal year ending June 30. It said it would not issue further earnings or revenue forecasts.

Microsoft intends to focus on improving performance in innovation and market-share growth, as well as generate efficiencies through the prioritization of resources. The software giant also indicated it is moving to maintain cash liquidity so it can continue to make acquisitions.

"The opportunity to buy companies has never been better," Liddell said. "We will continue to buy some small-to-medium-sized businesses, but the level will be low in the next quarter or two."

Ballmer said he expects the computing market to shrink - perhaps for a year or two - and then begin growing from a lower base. "I view this as a pause," Ballmer said. "I don’t think there is any stopping of the forward march, for the market or for Microsoft."

Though Ballmer noted that Microsoft isn’t immune to the effects of the economy, he expressed confidence in the company’s product portfolio.

"We will continue to manage expenses and invest in long-term opportunities to deliver value to customers and shareholders, and we will emerge an even stronger industry leader than we are today," Ballmer said.

EC Could Strip Internet Explorer From Windows

Microsoft violated European Commission rules by tying Internet Explorer to its market-dominating operating system, the commission said in a preliminary ruling. The EC said that tie shields Microsoft from head-to-head competition with rival Web browsers.

In a Statement of Objections (SoO) delivered to Microsoft last week, the EC said tying Internet Explorer to Windows "harms competition between Web browsers, undermines product innovation, and ultimately reduces consumer choice." In response, Microsoft said it's studying the document and remains "committed to conducting our business in full compliance with European law."

The EC's latest move is a direct response to a complaint by rival browser maker Opera, which alleged it was experiencing ongoing competitive harm from Microsoft's practices. In particular, Opera complained that Internet Explorer embraces new proprietary technologies that reduce compatibility with open Internet standards, and therefore hinder competition.

The commission noted last week that Internet Explorer is available on 90 percent of the world's PCs. Citing the evidence it has gathered to date, the EC said tying Internet Explorer with Windows "distorts competition on the merits between competing Web browsers insofar as it provides Internet Explorer with an artificial distribution advantage which other Web browsers are unable to match."

Microsoft observed that the EC is concerned that the ubiquity of Internet Explorer creates artificial incentives for content providers and software developers to design Web sites or software primarily for Internet Explorer, which ultimately risks undermining competition and innovation.

"According to the EC's SoO, other browsers are foreclosed from competing because Windows includes Internet Explorer," Microsoft said. "The SoO states that the remedies put in place by the U.S. courts in 2002 following antitrust proceedings in Washington, D.C., do not make the inclusion of Internet Explorer in Windows lawful under European Union law."

The SoO is based on the legal and economic principles established by the Court of First Instance on Sept. 17, 2007 -- when the EC's highest judicial body upheld the commission's March 2004 ruling that Microsoft had abused its dominant position in the PC operating-system market by tying Windows Media Player to Windows.

If its preliminary views are confirmed, the commission said it could impose a fine on Microsoft, require the software giant to cease the abuse, and "impose a remedy that would restore genuine consumer choice and enable competition on the merits."

The EC could require Microsoft to offer PC manufacturers a version of Windows that doesn't include Internet Explorer, which is precisely what the EC ordered in its March 2004 decision on Microsoft's Windows Media Player. Microsoft, however, retained the right to also offer a version with Windows Media Player and could follow the same course with Internet Explorer.

Microsoft will have an opportunity to respond in writing to the EC's SoO within the next two months and can request a hearing. "Under EU procedure, the European Commission will not make a final determination until after it receives and assesses Microsoft's response and conducts the hearing, should Microsoft request one," the company said.

As a result of the EC's March 2004 ruling, Microsoft was assessed $1.4 billion in fines for stifling competition by directly linking its Media Player software to Windows.

US Supreme Court Shuts Door on Child Online Protection Act

The US Supreme Court on Wednesday upheld a lower court ruling that a law designed to shield children from pornography on the Internet violated the constitutional right to free speech.

The move by the highest court, which let the ruling stand without comment, would appear to mean the end of the road for the Child Online Protection Act (COPA), which was passed by Congress in 1998 but never enforced.

Rights groups welcomed the Supreme Court decision not to hear the Bush administration's appeal of the ban on COPA, with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) describing it as a "clear victory for free speech."

The ACLU has been among the groups which filed legal challenges to COPA on the grounds that it violated the First Amendment right to free speech.

"For over a decade the government has been trying to thwart freedom of speech on the Internet, and for years the courts have been finding the attempts unconstitutional," ACLU senior staff attorney Chris Hansen said Wednesday.

"It is not the role of the government to decide what people can see and do on the Internet," he said in a statement. "Those are personal decisions that should be made by individuals and their families."

"The court's decision not to review COPA for a third time affirms what we have been saying all along - the government has no right to censor protected speech on the Internet, and it cannot reduce adults to hearing and seeing only speech that the government considers suitable for children," added ACLU legal director Steven Shapiro.

Leslie Harris, president the Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT), also praised the Supreme Court for not interfering with the ruling of an appeals court in Pennsylvania in the case.

"We applaud the court's decision which ends the government's quixotic and wasteful 10-year effort to impose an unconstitutional censorship standard on Internet content," Harris said.

COPA was intended to prevent minors from accessing pornographic content on the Web but it ran into immediate and repeated legal challenges on free speech grounds.

Microsoft To Deliver First IE8 Release Candidate Monday

Microsoft plans to deliver the first release candidate of the next version of Internet Explorer on Monday, according to sources familiar with the company's plans.

Internet Explorer 8 (IE8) has been in its second beta release since August, and a post on Microsoft's IE8 blog on Wednesday said the company was "about to release" IE8 Release Candidate 1 (RC1) for Windows XP and Vista. Sources familiar with the company's plans said the release will be Monday.

In Microsoft terminology, a release candidate means the software is feature complete and the code is basically stable, and a final release is imminent.

Microsoft's public relations team also has sent out e-mails to members of the press saying that Microsoft will have some news regarding IE8 on Monday, but will only comment under embargo about that news.

Microsoft originally had hoped to release the final version of IE8 before the end of 2008, but as with many Microsoft product releases, the software's delivery was pushed back. Rather than set firm dates for software releases, Microsoft typically these days will say the final release of software is dependent upon user feedback from the beta process.

Microsoft has developed IE8 to be more compliant with accepted Web-development standards such as CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and RSS. This is a goal the company also had with IE7 but which backfired because developers who built sites for earlier versions of IE found they didn't render properly or work at all on IE7 once it supported those standards.

Microsoft developed IE before many Web standards were developed, and so older versions of IE don't support them. Developers would typically write applications to work with IE rather than to support standards because IE was the de facto standard for Web browsing for many years. That has changed, starting with the release of the open-source browser Mozilla Firefox several years ago. Firefox and now Google's Chrome browser have given users more browser choice, so Microsoft has had to make IE more competitive and standards-compliant.

IE8 also has some new features to make browsing the Web easier and more convenient for users, including two called Web Slices and Activities. Web Slices lets users subscribe to pages or points of interest they visit on the Web, such as news feeds or eBay auctions, and keep track of them through tiles that appear in IE's navigation menu.

Some third parties have even developed custom Web Slices. For example, a social search-engine company called OneRiot has developed a Web Slice that lets users keep track of the most frequently visited links other Web users are clicking on in real time.

Activities let the user right-click on a Web page and pull in maps or other Web pages into a site they are browsing without need for more coding or add-ins by the developer.

Microsoft also had said improving overall browser performance is a goal for IE8, as IE7's frequent crashes are the reason many users say they have switched to Firefox from IE.

New AOL Webmail Connects Gmail, Yahoo Mail

AOL’s newly formed Products and Technologies Group made its first product announcement on Thursday, an update of AOL Mail that allows users to access Gmail and Yahoo Mail accounts.

In addition to the plugins for external mail accounts, the second largest free email service has also been updated for faster performance, over 45 new customization themes, and calendar and address syncing with mobile devices including BlackBerry and the Apple iPhone.

"Web mail is an integral part of the AOL experience and at the heart of our product offerings," said Ted Cahall, president of AOL Products and Technologies. "With this new release, we can showcase the important role AOL products continue to play in the company. Enhancing products that already attract a large, engaged audience is a key goal for our organization."

The company claims that has 48 million users for all of its mail services, including installed software and Web-based. Unique visitors to the web mail services, mail.aol.com and AIM mail users saw a 27 percent increase in unique visitors. Page views were up 21 percent in 2008.

"People who are using AOL Mail represent an already-engaged audience," said Rich Landsman, senior vice president of AOL Mail. "As we continue to extend our capabilities far beyond sending and receiving mail, we are challenging ourselves and third-party developers everywhere to create new opportunities for delivering customized, relevant content using our mail platform."

The new Products and Technologies group is part of the company’s move to an ad-based profit model, and includes Mail, Mapquest, AOL Search, Truveo video search, and AOL Mobile, as well as the back-end infrastructure teams. You can check out the new webmail client at mail.aol.com.

Low-Cost, Open-Source Web Tablet Comes to Life

The growing category of very inexpensive laptops, spearheaded by netbooks and One Laptop Per Child’s vision of the $100 laptop, may soon have another offering.

TechCrunch’s Michael Arrington, who voiced an open call last July for a "dead simple touchscreen Web tablet that boots right into the browser," costs $200, and is open source, has reported that a second - and better - prototype for such a device is now up and running. He calls it the CrunchPad, and others have described it as a netbook without the keyboard.

In his original posting, Arrington asked for help in creating the new device. "Nothing fancy" like the $2,500 Dell Latitude XT, he wrote. "Just a MacBook Air-thin touchscreen machine that runs Firefox and possibly Skype on top of a Linux kernel." And, once built, he proposed to "open source the specs" so that anyone could build one.

Arrington said he wanted one to sit on his lap so he could easily and comfortably browse Web pages related to TV programs - or, since the device would play Flash video, he could watch movies or TV shows from Hulu, YouTube or Joost. Music playing, video chatting, and e-mail would round out the capabilities. By focusing on the browser, Arrington said, the device could use very low-end hardware.

In August, Prototype A was built with an aluminum case "twice as thick as it needs to be," and performance that offered more potential than actual. "It barely booted," Arrington admitted, but it was enough of a demonstration that he knew he wanted one that worked well.

Now the project has a team lead, Louis Monier, the founder and chief technical officer of AltaVista and former head of eBay's Advanced Technology Group. And Prototype B is now ready.

Prototype B sports a 12-inch, 1024x768 touchscreen, a 4:3 aspect ratio, and a Via Nano processor. Arrington wrote that the processor performs comparably to Intel's Atom processor, used in its netbooks.

The prototype has a gigabyte of RAM, and a 4GB flash drive for the operating system, browser and Web cache. Other features include Wi-Fi, an accelerometer that lets the device reposition a Web page when the machine is turned, a camera, and a four-cell battery.

The weight is about three pounds and, although his original vision was for a $200 price tag, Arrington said something under $299 is more realistic.

The prototype runs a full install of the Ubuntu Linux open-source operating system, with a custom Webkit browser. The user experience and feature set are being built by Singapore-based FusionGarage, whose blog touts its enthusiasm for "the browser as an operating system."

Arrington said the effort has received "thousands" of e-mails, with many expressing a desire to own a CrunchPad. He also noted "quite a bit of interest" from potential investors, adding that the decision hasn't been made whether a company will be spun off to produce units for sale.

Domain Registrar Go Daddy Tries Web Marketplace

It may sound counterintuitive to launch an online marketplace as Web retail sales are slumping, but Internet domain name registrar Go Daddy Group Inc. is betting that it can translate its home page traffic into sales of teak slab tables and decorative clogs.

The Scottsdale, Ariz.-based company opened the Go Daddy Marketplace on Tuesday, which lets users list as many things as they want for a $5 monthly fee and 10 percent commission on products that sell. The company has not advertised the service yet, apart from a link near the top of its home page.

So far, "hundreds" of sellers have listed "tens of thousands" of products, according to Go Daddy's executive vice president and chief marketing officer, Barb Rechterman.

Go Daddy Marketplace is still tiny compared to the millions of items available through eBay Inc. or online retailer Amazon.com Inc. On the day after GoDaddy's marketplace launched, you could buy items ranging from iPod accessories to silver jewelry, but searches for various consumer electronics, DVDs and musical instruments yielded few results.

Even so, Rechterman said the company's home page gets a "tremendous amount" of traffic, and privately held Go Daddy hopes this will bring buyers and sellers. According to comScore Inc., the Go Daddy site averaged 2.3 million visitors per month in 2008.

And while the sluggish economy is hurting many retailers, both on and off the Web, Rechterman thinks it is a good time to start such a service, saying that merchants are hungry to sell their products.

"Businesses need to do business," she said.

'Updated' Worm Using Obama Spam To Spread Rapidly

A virus that is spreading with a vengeance is plaguing businesses in the new year. The Conficker worm, which caused havoc on Windows PCs in October, has come back to strike more than 3.5 million PCs in 24 hours under a new name, Downadup, according to security analysts.

The worm resurfaced earlier in the month, infecting Windows workstations and servers and causing a variety of problems for users.

Downadup consists of a family of network worms that are difficult to remove, especially when there is an infection inside a corporate network, according to F-Secure, a security company which first released warnings about the worm.

"First discovered in October 2008, Conficker, Kido or Downadup is a very sophisticated worm, but the updated version from two weeks ago is much more serious," said Jart Armin, a security specialist with HostExploit. "Essentially it becomes part of MS Windows services.exe, and then establishes an HTTP server from the infected PC."

Armin added that the worm automatically generates hundreds of domain names to fool any tracking, but only one is the real site that downloads the malicious instruction set.

"It also enables replication via USB sticks and across office networks," Armin said. "It appears to be especially timed to take advantage of the holidays and lack of IT staff around."

Is there any help for victims of the Conficker? Some, according to security specialists.

One is to watch out for fake Barack Obama sites, according to F-Secure's blog. The company is seeing spam trying to use the presidential inauguration as a way to push spam and the Downadup-related activity.

E-mails have been sent around the world suggesting users follow links to Obama Web sites. Some fake Web sites that produce malware are store.greatobamaguide.com, store.superobamadirect.com and superobamaonline.com.

And there are many more, according to F-Secure.

F-Secure has also posted the registered countries for the IP addresses causing harm and they include China, Brazil, Russia, India, the Ukraine, Italy, Thailand, Taiwan and Kazakhstan, to name a few. Most, however, originate in China, Brazil and Russia.

"The main fake Web site was superobamaonline.com, which has now been taken offline; however more are likely to appear," Armin said. "It shows registration via XIN NET Technology Corp. of China; however, this domain registrar has been primarily used by Russian cybercriminals."

"Essentially these fake Web sites are a 'fast-flux' botnet hosted around the globe, and the links via spam e-mail point to a file called speech.exe, which is a Waladec malware variant," he added.

Updating your PC has never been more valuable than now, according Armin, who said consumers need the latest operating-system updates and patches.

As always, PC users and businesses also need to be sure to update antivirus software.

"Microsoft has patches. However the ongoing problem resides where many PCs do not have the latest MS patches, i.e. MS patch MS08-07, and estimates vary from one to nine million PCs infected worldwide," Armin said.

Trojan Found in Pirated Apple iWork Software

Internet security firm Intego said on Thursday that it has discovered a new Trojan horse in pirated copies of Apple's iWork '09 productivity software that could allow an attacker to take control of the infected computer.

The Trojan horse, OSX.Trojan.iServices.A, discovered circulating in copies of the software on BitTorrent trackers and other pirate sites, is rated serious, according to Intego's security alert.

When iWork is installed, the Trojan is installed as a start-up item as a part of iWorkServices. It has read-write-execute permissions for root control of the computer, Intego said. The malware connects to a remote server over the Internet and may download additional components to the infected computer.

As of early Thursday, at least 20,000 people had downloaded the iWork '09 installer, according to Intego.

Meanwhile, an Italian researcher has uncovered a way to inject malicious code into memory of OS X-based computers, which would enable attackers to easily hide their activities, according to The Register.

'Hacker' Wins Right To Fight Extradition to US

A Briton accused of hacking into computers owned by the US military and NASA space agency got the green light Friday for a fresh legal challenge against a bid to extradite him to the United States.

Gary McKinnon, 42, faces spending the rest of his life in prison if convicted by a US court of gaining access to 97 computers in 2001 and 2002, following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

He says he was looking for evidence of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), while his supporters say he has Asperger’s Syndrome - a form of autism - and could attempt suicide if he is forced to go to the United States.

Two judges at the High Court gave McKinnon’s lawyers permission Friday to seek a judicial review of Home Secretary Jacqui Smith’s decision last October that he should be extradited.

Speaking after the ruling, McKinnon’s solicitor Karen Todner said it was "the right decision".

"The judges have granted permission for a review of our claim that the Home Secretary has not sufficiently taken account of the effects of Asperger’s and particularly the effect it will have upon him if he were to be extradited," she said.

"It is the right decision. This case has been going on since 2002 and finally we have got the first right decision."

England and Wales’s new Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer, is also looking at a request for McKinnon to be tried in Britain rather than the United States. His supporters believe he would get a more lenient sentence here.

McKinnon, who was diagnosed with Asperger’s last August, has signed a statement accepting that he has committed an offence under British law.

Starmer’s decision is expected within the next month.

Nasty Worm Wriggles into Millions of Computers

A nasty worm has wriggled into millions of computers and continues to spread, leaving security experts wondering whether the attack is a harbinger of evil deeds to come.

US software protection firm F-Secure says a computer worm known as "Conficker" or "Downadup" had infected more than nine million computers by Tuesday and was spreading at a rate of one million machines daily.

The malicious software had yet to do any noticeable damage, prompting debate as to whether it is impotent, waiting to detonate, or a test run by cybercriminals intent on profiting from the weakness in the future.

"This is enormous; possibly the biggest virus we have ever seen," said software security specialist David Perry of Trend Micro.

"I think the bad guys are field testing a new technology. If Conficker proves to work well, they could go out and sell malware (malicious

software) to people. There is a huge market for selling criminal malware."

The worm, a self-replicating program, takes advantage of networks or computers that haven’t kept up to date with security patches for Windows RPC Server Service.

It can infect machines from the Internet or by hiding on USB memory sticks carrying data from one computer to another. Once in a computer it digs deep, setting up defenses that make it hard to extract.

Malware could be triggered to steal data or turn control of infected computers over to hackers amassing "zombie" machines into "botnet" armies.

"Here we are with a big, big outbreak and they keep revamping their methodology to increase the size of it," Perry said. "They could be growing this huge botnet to slice it up and sell it on the criminal market."

Microsoft says it is aware of the Conficker "worm family" and has modified its free to detect and get rid of infections.

The US software giant also advises people to stay current on anti-virus tools and Windows updates, and to protect computers and files with strong passwords.

A troubling aspect of Conficker is that it harnesses computing power of a botnet to crack passwords.

Repeated "guesses" at passwords by a botnet have caused some computer users to be locked out of files or machines that automatically disable access after certain numbers of failed tries.

"Downadup uses brute force from the infected network of botnets to break the password of the machine being attacked," Perry said. "That is something never seen before and I find it disturbing."

Perry urges people to harden passwords by mixing in numbers, punctuation marks, and upper-case letters. Doing so makes it millions of times harder for passwords to be deduced, according to Perry.

"This is necessary in a world where malware hacks passwords," Perry said.

"Go get a notebook, keep it next to your computer and record your password in it. No hacker in the world can hack the written page locked away in your office."

Internet Applauds 25 Years of Apple Macintosh

All across the Internet, people are celebrating 25 years of Apple’s Macintosh computer. From heartfelt tributes about the first time they touched the IIe to fond remembrances of Apple’s less-than-prosperous ideas, stories are flowing about one of the most inspirational and influential companies ever.

CNET fondly revisits Apple’s famous 1984-tinged Super Bowl commercial and Apple’s other advertising campaigns, which have all set the company apart from its competition and detractors as an innovator daring to think different

(and inspired both competitors and creative parodies).

"In the entertainment industry, it was the dawn of the cinematic Super Bowl ad," writes Caroline McCarthy. "For historians, it was a notable moment in Soviet-tinged pop culture. But in the tech world, this was the birth of Apple as we know it - 25 years ago this week."

Gizmodo also applauds the 1984 commercial and delves into its more technical aspects. Gizmodo's writers also take a time-out for some sentimental praise: "With one single emission, it generated millions of dollars in free coverage and re-runs in TV stations through the nation and abroad, and became a historical landmark to advertisers, companies, and public alike."

MacRumors stumbled upon an inspiring speech given by COO Tim Cook during Wednesday's earnings conference call. When asked about Steve Jobs' medical leave of absence, Cook launched into Apple's philosophy on how it builds, functions, and innovates. Part of the text reads: "We believe that we're on the face of the Earth to make great products, and that's not changing. We're constantly focusing on innovating. We believe in the simple, not the complex.... We believe in saying no to thousands of projects so that we can really focus on the few that are truly important and meaningful to us."

Cook's impromptu pulpit pounder might illuminate better than any historical timeline the drive and impact Apple, and the Macintosh, has had upon the technology industry.

For serious in-depth coverage of Apple's anniversary, check out Macworld's multi-part series exploring everything from software, to icons, to some of Apple's less than prosperous inventions.

Iain Thompson writes for vunet.com about why he still hates Macs. His acid-laced diatribes include bits like, "the Mac moved from being a useful tool to something to be loathed," and "One of the key reasons I hate Macs are their users. There's a certain kind of smug, snooty Apple user that makes me want to reach for the EMP cannon. Apple's fan base bears more resemblance to cults like Scientology than many would like to admit."

Ouch. Thompson writes for all you out there who aren't so keen on celebrating any aspect of Apple's history.

The Telegraph looks back with skepticism, and posits that Apple wasn't actually quite so much an innovator as it was a "refiner."

Sadly, the quietest site on the web is Apple.com, which has a unique opportunity to revisit its history and chart the growth of its role in home computing. But ever the nonconformist, one can only think that Apple chooses to look forward, into future possibilities and innovations, rather than consider the past.

Pope Welcomes Facebook, But Cautions

Pope Benedict XVI says social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace can foster friendships and understanding, but warns they also can isolate people and marginalize others.

Benedict urged a culture of online respect in his annual message Friday for the World Day of Communications.

Benedict welcomes as a "gift" new technologies such as social networking sites, saying they respond to the "fundamental desire" of people to communicate.

But he also warns that "obsessive" virtual socializing can isolate people from real interaction and deepen the digital divide by excluding those already marginalized.

He urges producers to ensure that the content respects human dignity and the "goodness and intimacy of human sexuality."

New Thinking About Passwords: Write ’Em Down

It used to be conventional wisdom among security experts that you should never write your passwords down, but thinking is changing on this. Roger Thompson, a respected anti-malware guy, thinks you should write them down. I’ve seen this from other people and I do it too, to a degree.

As Thompson says, it’s not just that you should write them down, but that you should have a lot of them and write them down. It is far more secure for you to have a variety of passwords, so that if any one of them is compromised the damage can be limited. If you write them down you can better handle a larger number of passwords.

Thomson says that you should write them down "either in your wallet or in a database." I’m not sure I like either option. As he says, if you put them in your wallet and your wallet is lost or stolen you’ll know to reset your passwords. I would hesitate to have them in my wallet. But I would not put them in a database unless that database itself was heavily protected.

And of course there are products, like Norton Identity Safe (part of Norton Internet Security, which store and encrypt your passwords.

Yahoo Mail Gets an Antispam Boost

Yahoo has taken new steps to sharpen its Webmail service’s antispam capabilities, including the adoption of two commercial technologies and the testing of an open-source system, the company said Tuesday.

Abaca announced that Yahoo will use its e-mail security technology designed to detect malicious phishing and spam messages and filter them out of Yahoo
Mail inboxes.

Meanwhile, Return Path said separately that Yahoo will implement its Complaint Feedback Loop, a service that notifies legitimate e-mail marketers whenever end users tag their messages as spam, so that they can investigate why, such as using an incorrect mailing list, and take

corrective action.

Finally, Yahoo announced that its internal antispam team has been using a "supercomputer" grid made up of thousands of PCs to improve its ability to detect spammers. Yahoo is working with universities in this research effort, whose PC grid is part of the company's open source Hadoop project.

In a blog posting announcing the various efforts, Yahoo's Anti-Spam Czar Mark Risher wrote that fighting spam continues to be a huge challenge and priority for the company. "The bad guys are always out there trying to make a buck with their scams, but we're committed to helping keep you safer online," Risher said.

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